

So you've read a little about literacy (and reading). Here are some thoughts regarding oral and literate (or chirographic) cultures. Much of the info in the beginning comes from [Walter Ong's](#) landmark *Orality and Literacy*.

Texts from oral culture, chirographic, and print cultures

One problem with analyzing oral stories that were eventually written down is that we have to read them in translation. The examples Ong provides are from ancient languages (an early Hellenic or Germanic language, for instance) that most of us do not understand, even if we could read them or hear them read. However, we must trust the judgment of Ong and those he cites to understand that oral texts contain certain features that are not usually valued in literate cultures.

Oral texts tend to be episodic, with repetition placed strategically in and around some of the episodes. A few years ago I read Robert Fagles's translation of *The Odyssey*, and fascinated as I still am by the story, I couldn't help scanning over some of the repeated formulas. When oral poets need to supply a detail and they already have a chunk of words worked out in the proper rhyme scheme, why not keep using that chunk of words? The repetition is a memory aid. So the sun doesn't just appear in *The Odyssey*. No, "When young Dawn with her rose-red fingers shone once more..." is the way the day starts there. But the impatient reader tends to skip that phrasing after the first few times. However, try listening to the same translation as read by Ian McKellen, and you'll find that it does sound better than it reads. It's almost lyrical. It makes you want to recite right along. See this link for a news release: <http://www.princeton.edu/pr/news/96/q4/1114fagl.html>

But repetition is not typically rewarded in essay writing as it is in oral texts or written poetry. When John Lee Hooker sings about his baby in "Decoration Day," he describes her as "Nice and kind." That sounds just fine in a blues song, but in an essay it would be a redundancy. *Nice* and *kind* are not sufficiently different in meaning to both be needed. And later we learn that his baby turns up "dead and gone." Same thing. Along those lines and for a variety of reasons, any Tom Jones song is going to be egregious poetry, but they all tend to employ repetition. For example, check out the lyrics to "Without Love": <http://www.lyricsdepot.com/tom-jones/without-love-there-is-nothing.html> What is the difference between *barren* and *bare*? Not enough in writing, but things songs were meant to be heard, so the repetition works.

Translators and scribes have to put their own sense of poetry into the translating and scribing. The same was true for the 7th century monks who wrote down the oral epic *Beowulf*. That's a pagan story with Celtic rhyming patterns that somehow sprouted sections about the Virgin Mother and the world's Savior after the monks transcribed it. But the monks kept that sense of poetry, and so have many translators through the ages,

including poet Seamus Heaney, whose fairly recent translation is highly regarded. A little bit about that: <http://www.norton.com/nael/beowulf/welcome.htm>

Besides the changes in thought and perception because of the freedom from memory work (or slothfulness, depending on your perspective) that writing provided, the evolving technology also played a part. If you had at your disposal only an animal's hip bone for stationery, you would think out your ideas carefully before writing them down.



Such was the case for Ancient Romans, according to the exhibit above, on display at the British Museum.

Things are easier these days, even if you have to stop and refill your pen occasionally:



Think about how expensive writing materials used to be and how much more difficult writing was before the word processor came along. Once we get past the initial expense of the computer, we can just write thoughts down as they come to us and then easily revise later. If not for the alphabet, and they print, and then typography, we wouldn't be this far advanced in putting thoughts down in writing and this far regressed in memory use.

Texts from digital cultures

Note how webpages have changed thinking the last decade or so. Don't you expect to be able to click on a link once in a while to visit some other text? And people tend not to click links in the same order, so reading from left to right, top to bottom doesn't hold consistently as it used to. Furthermore, those links can have audio or video files: <http://www.engl.virginia.edu/OE/Beowulf.Readings/Beowulf.Readings.html>

Even furthermore, some digital texts encourage new ways of participating. Trying to read some of Michael Joyce's hypertext writing presents a special challenge: http://www.courses.vcu.edu/ENG-rhf/michael_joyce_publications4.htm Or you might find yourself in an online environment in which the text does more than serve to communicate. It also serves to create an identity and to establish movement: <http://lingua.utdallas.edu:7000/>

In conclusion, because written texts traditionally wend their way to a conclusion, the shift from orality to literacy to secondary orality to digital orality has changed thinking patterns and perceptions of the world. When Burke writes about literacy, he's talking about an evolving concept, one that evolves with technologies and needs.